



BOOK REVIEWS

David W. H. Godfrey

Modern Technical Communication
Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd. ,1983

Reviewed by
Hilary Horan
Department of Communication
University of Ottawa

In the Preface to **Modern Technical Communication**, David W. H. Godfrey cites the often used proverb: "Do not give a man a fish -- teach him how to fish." Indeed this is the basic philosophy that guides all educational pursuits. The author admits that his work is a "minimal textbook" while purporting it to be a "how to" book rather than a comprehensive book trying to be all things to all people. Godfrey defines his market as students (and instructors) of high-technology curricula as well as professionals already in the field who need to acquire practical writing skills. Such limitations of scope are good in that they help the author to focus on the specific purpose of the writing, and they help the reader to readily identify if the book is likely to be relevant to his or her needs. In most cases, however, this book does not offer many transferable principles to guide the student in effectively communicating in a modern technological world. For the most part, it is little more than a very cursory introduction to what most college and university students would have already gleaned from intuition or observation.

Part One ("Chapter" is not used) is a good breakdown of the various audiences that a technical communicator might encounter. For instance, the differentiation between internal and external public relations is useful. As well, the distinction between the various channels (Message Mechanics) in Part Two may be enlightening to the neophyte. However, these pieces of information should be analysed further and then "married" to each other. For instance, telling the reader that she or he must "assess" his or her audiences and then tailor the communications to suit them, defines the general problem that the communicator faces but does not help him or her to solve it. Guidelines as to which channels are most (or least) appropriate for each audience would be more helpful.

Part Three is probably the book's strongest section. Godfrey provides a good discussion of writing and style. Principles of language are discussed and rules for graphic description are presented (e.g., bar graphs vs. statistical tables; line drawings vs. photographs, etc.). As in similar books, the merits of jargon are discussed but then the author seems to transgress his own admonitions. He refers to "frontispieces" in publications, "halftones" in printing and notes that "the ordinate line is logarithmic" -- all phrases which a sample of students found perplexing. Godfrey's defence is that this will stimulate greater interaction between student and instructor. As an educator, I value this Socratic approach. As an editor, though, I feel that the writing should speak for itself.

Part Four is again a cursory introduction to the obvious. Matters involved with persuasive versus descriptive letter and memo writing are addressed but offer the inexperienced communicator very little knowledge of "how

to" compose a forceful or assertive correspondence, i.e., What are specific approaches to persuading top management, motivating subordinates, inducing clients to buy, etc.? Related to the topic of correspondence, discussions on the merits of word processing and dictation would be helpful but are missing from this text.

The one page reference to telecommunications seems scant compared to recent developments in high technology. The merits, disadvantages and appropriateness of electronic data transmission, videotext, audio and video teleconferencing and videotape memos and newsletters should be more fully discussed in light of the "state of the art."

Parts Six and Eight are likewise very general (and short) introductions to communication topics about which volumes and courses have been developed: Image-Enhancement and Oral Presentations. The reader finds very little practical, "how to" information in these sections.

Part Seven, on Resumes, is a good basic guide to the subject of job seeking. It is clearly written, gives good general guidelines as well as specific models.

Part Nine is largely a discussion derived from Lockheed Corporation material on the use of CADAM, a computer graphics program developed by that aerospace company. This is a good description of how one system is used by designers to communicate with each other as well as with machinists and machines -- assisted and mediated by computers. According to the author, it is generally applicable to other systems. As a technical writer, Godfrey might have included a flow-chart here to summarize the steps taken in the process.

Godfrey includes nearly 100 pages of Appendices which are not to be overlooked. As a "how to" book, these sections provide some of the most interesting and instructive information in the text. There is a very short reading list. I feel that there should be many more "further reading" references throughout the chapters.

The work is, as Godfrey claims, a "minimal textbook." It is, however, more of a "what is" than a "how to" book. I am afraid that if Godfrey wants to teach men (and women) how to fish, first he will have to mend his nets.